

A right-wing rant against British youth from Slavoj Žižek

By Stefan Steinberg
27 August 2011

There was no shortage of venom on the part of the British establishment directed against the youth involved in the recent protests and riots in Great Britain. The right-wing press, particularly the Murdoch empire, anxious to distract attention from its own crimes, howled for blood, publishing mug shot photos of those it termed “riot yobs” and “thugs.”

Political cover for this campaign of state and media repression was provided by leading members of the Labour Party’s so-called “left”, like former London Mayor Ken Livingstone and the prominent black rights activist and MP Dianne Abbott. Several British and German Stalinist and ex-left organizations rushed to demonstrate their own credentials as rabid advocates of capitalist law and order policies.

The latest recruit to this campaign of political slander is the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, who has launched his own vicious attack on the youth involved in the riots. Žižek recently published an article, titled cynically “Shoplifters of the World Unite,” in the leading British literary magazine *London Review of Books*.

Stripped of its pseudo-sociological and post-modernist trappings, the article articulates both the contempt for and fear of the working class that is the tradition hallmark of the extreme right.

Žižek criticizes the rioters for the fact that they “had no message to deliver” and then refers to (and thoroughly distorts in the process) the German philosopher Hegel to describe the youth as “rabble ... who can express their discontent only through ‘irrational’ outbursts of destructive violence.”

Žižek then goes further in his defamation of those involved in the protests. Following a passing reference to one of his ideological influences, the German-American philosopher Herbert Marcuse, Žižek proclaims: “On British streets during the unrest, what we saw was not men reduced to ‘beasts’, but the stripped-down form of the ‘beast’ produced by capitalist ideology.”

According to Žižek the mindless “beasts” who took to the streets of London, Manchester and Leeds were motivated solely by the most primitive drives, first and foremost, the urge to consume. Here Žižek cites the Polish-British sociologist and post-modernist Zygmunt Bauman, who characterized the riots as the work of “defective and disqualified consumers.”

The real target of Žižek’s wrath in his polemic are what he terms “leftist liberals” who “predictably, stuck to their mantra about social programs and integration initiatives, the neglect of

which has deprived second- and third-generation immigrants of their economic and social prospects.”

For Žižek such social factors are completely irrelevant when it comes to explaining the riots. After all, as this well-paid academic notes in another place in his diatribe, “The protesters, though underprivileged and de facto socially excluded, weren’t living on the edge of starvation.”

In a nod towards his audience of former leftist radicals and disenchanted sections of academia, Žižek goes on to criticize one form of conservative reaction to the riots, represented by the Thatcherite wing of the British conservative party.

This allows him to then turn the stage over to one of the main political influences in his own political career, Joseph Stalin. The Soviet dictator, in his wisdom, Žižek tells us, would have condemned both the conservative and leftist reactions to the riots. Žižek’s positive reference to Stalin in his article is no coincidence, as we shall see.

His slanders directed against those involved in the riots continue and intensify. Not content with denouncing the youth as “rabble” and “beasts,” Žižek then goes on to draw an analogy between the riots and “terrorist attacks and suicide bombings.”

As is the case with all of his various essays on contemporary issues, Žižek seeks to strike a radical pose. In fact, the supposed philosopher has absolutely nothing new to say. Žižek’s ruminations in his essay about the all-embracing power of capitalism, and the utter subservience of the working class to the god of consumption are all old hat— notions elaborated and propagated decades ago by the Frankfurt School and the post-modernists.

As is the case with these latter theorists, Žižek has nothing to say about the politics of those parties and organizations which are traditionally associated with the working class—in the case of Britain, the Labour Party and the trade unions. Their betrayals are ignored. Instead Žižek instructs us that the rioters are “beasts” fully in the grip of capitalist ideology.

It is necessary to be quite blunt about the formulations used by Žižek in his article. When one puts aside the phony sociological verbiage, the arguments he puts forward would not be out of place in a tract produced by the extreme right of the political spectrum. This verdict is reinforced by the conclusion of his article.

Declaring that the riots will do nothing to change the political status quo, Žižek puts forward his own proposal for the type of dictatorial regime and “strong man” traditionally associated with

Stalin and the Stalinist bureaucracy. What is necessary, Žizек argues, is “to impose a re-organization of social life. To do that, one needs a strong body able to reach quick decisions and to implement them with all necessary harshness.”

Who is Slavoj Žizек?

A brief resume of Žizек’s career makes clear that the authoritarian and virulently anti-working-class positions he has adopted in the *London Review of Books* are not accidental.

The son of hard-line Stalinist parents in former Yugoslavia, Žizек took his first post-university job in 1977 working for the Central Committee of the Slovenian League of Communists. Amongst his tasks was writing speeches for members of the Stalinist bureaucracy.

Žizек had studied philosophy as a student, specializing in the forms of western ideology which were popular in the 1960s and 1970s. Through his studies he was able to develop his first contacts with west European academic layers. Realizing in the 1980s that Tito’s so-called “third way” in Yugoslavia—aimed at maneuvering between the Stalinist bureaucracy in the east and the imperialist countries in the west—was destined to failure, Žizек joined the pro-capitalist, secessionist Liberal Democracy of Slovenia (LDS) in the late 1980s.

Žizек was no mere party foot soldier. In 1990 he was a candidate for the post of President of Slovenia, losing out narrowly to another LDS candidate. The LDS led coalition governments from 1992 to 2004 and was instrumental in implementing capitalist shock therapy economic policies in Slovenia following its secession from Yugoslavia. Žizек continued to actively support the party throughout this period.

At the same time Žizек was also able to develop his links with former leftist organizations that had drawn thoroughly pessimistic conclusions from the collapse of the eastern European Stalinist states and were increasingly accommodating themselves to capitalism and the free market. Alongside his political activities for the LDS, Žizек wrote essays in the British theoretical magazine *New Left Review*, whose leading staff were drawn from the ranks of the United Secretariat, which had broken with Trotskyism in 1953.

With the support of such forces Žizек was able to publish a series of essays and books, winning an audience among demoralized and cynical layers of the ex-left with his own brand of neo-Stalinist authoritarianism and cultural criticism, spiced with sexual innuendo and toilet humor.

While supporting the neo-liberal LDS, Žizек never made a secret of his continuing admiration for Stalin. In his books and essays he variously refers to “the inner greatness of Stalinism” and the “emancipatory potential” of Stalinist ideology “even at its most totalitarian.” Žizек has even defended Stalin’s policy of the forced collectivization in the late 1920s, which cost the lives of millions of Soviet peasants.

Together with his close political collaborator, the French Maoist Alain Badiou, Žizек has also publicly supported Mao’s disastrous cultural revolution.

Žizек’s open embrace of Stalinist authoritarianism (note 1), glorification of capitalism (2), dismissal of the working class (3), unabashed idealism (4) and occasional defense of figures of the

extreme right (5), have proved no obstacle to organizations eager to jump on the bandwagon of this fraud and political provocateur. For the past decade the chief political sponsor of Žizек has been the state capitalist Socialist Workers Party in Britain.

Already in 2001, the leader of the SWP, Alex Callinicos, gave his imprimatur for close collaboration with the Slovenian writer. Callinicos wrote in the magazine *Historical Materialism* “as eloquent and original (a) writer as Žizек is a powerful and welcome recruit to the anti-capitalist struggle.” Since then Callinicos and the SWP have regularly provided a platform for Žizек at summer events held in both Britain and Germany.

Žizек’s vile tirade against those taking part in the recent British street protests should be taken as a warning: a qualitative shift is underway amongst a layer of the ex-radical middle class left. In the case of the NATO-led operation against Libya, the Pabloite United Secretariat and other ex-left organizations have openly embraced the foreign policy ambitions of the imperialist powers that conducted the war. Žizек speaks on behalf of sections of the middle class, including a host of ex-left organizations, who are increasingly alarmed by the inability of the discredited labor organizations to stifle growing popular opposition to social decline.

Žizек’s article in the *London Review of Books* makes clear that the British bourgeoisie can rely on the ready support of such petty-bourgeois forces in its search for new forms of authoritarian rule to impose draconian social cuts and tame the working class “beast.”

Notes:

Note 1: A Google image search using the terms Žizек and Stalin, links to a photo of Žizек lying in bed in his apartment in Ljubljana. Above his head is a portrait of Stalin.

Note 2: “One of the clearest lessons of the last few decades is that capitalism is indestructible”, *London Review of Books*, 2007

Note 3: “I am not an idiot. It wouldn’t mean anything to return to the Leninist working class today”, Interview with Žizек 2002

Note 4: “As a theoretician I have the right to write about things I do not know about. I believe in absolute theory.” Interview with the German *taz* newspaper.

Note 5: See Žizек’s essay “Why Heidegger made the right step in 1933.” Žizек criticizes Hitler for being insufficiently violent, and Nazism for being insufficiently radical.

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